

# Remarks by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III at the Commandant of the Marine Corps Relinquishment of Office Ceremony



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Well, good morning, everyone.

It's an honor to be here at Marine Barracks Washington, which is the oldest active post in the Corps.

And it's great to see Secretary Del Toro, General Milley, and so many other military leaders, distinguished guests, friends, and family members.

I'm delighted to be with you to celebrate the career of an outstanding Marine: our 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David Berger.

But he would be the first to tell you that today is a celebration of all of our outstanding Marines.

For two and a half centuries, U.S. Marines have proudly been the "first to fight." They've fought with valor on beaches, in cities, and in jungles. Their commitment to our democracy and to their brothers and sisters in arms is unbreakable. And their courage has long been central to America's success on the battlefield.

Today, we face a challenging new security landscape. But our Marines are navigating it with the same grit, power, and resolve that have always set the Corps apart.

That's especially important in our primary theater of operations, the Indo-Pacific. I was honored to visit earlier this year with some very impressive Marines in Japan and the Philippines. I got to see firsthand how the Corps is strengthening deterrence alongside our allies. And the Corps is hard at work standing up the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment in Okinawa, which will make our Joint Force even more lethal.

Marines are also central to our operations and deterrence in Europe. They train alongside our NATO allies on everything from cold-weather operations to mountain warfare. And as Russia continues its cruel war of choice against Ukraine, our "stand-in force" of Marines is critical for NATO's deterrence and defense.

In fact, it's hard to find a spot on the globe where Marines aren't making it safer.

And when a crisis erupts, we count on our Marines to be ready for anything—and to leap into action.

Today, as we work to strengthen our military for the great competitions ahead, the Marine Corps is absolutely central.

The Force Design 2030 Plan outlines how the Marines will modernize the Corps to deepen America's deterrence—and, if necessary, to fight and to win wherever they must.

And General Dave Berger has led this historic and transformational effort.

He's done so with vision, creativity, and boldness.

He's not just willing to embrace change.

He's eager to lead change.

It's often said that militaries are always preparing to fight the last war.

But General Berger has been driving hard to deter the next war.

In his four years as Commandant, he has focused relentlessly on the future fight. He has faced hard choices head-on. He has encouraged creative thinking at every level of the Corps. And he has pushed our Department to redefine readiness for the 21st century.

Now, despite all of his achievements, Dave is one of the most humble leaders in our inventory.

In fact, he probably hates that I'm talking about him right now.

But I'm going to do it for a few more minutes, Dave, so relax.

You know, anyone who's worked in government knows how tempting it can be to just kick the can down the road, or to make do with the old ways for a little longer.

But that's not Dave Berger.

His staff says that he has "never once hit the 'Easy' button."

And that's been true throughout his career.

As a young officer, General Berger did it all: reconnaissance training, jumpmaster school, aviation, combat dive, you name it.

He went on to command the First Marine Division in Afghanistan, the First Marine Expeditionary Force in Camp Pendleton, and Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, where he saw

firsthand what it takes to deter aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

He's a warrior-scholar. He's a tremendous communicator. He's a tireless advocate for younger Marines.

And he's a great listener.

In fact, General Berger believes that the more senior you get, the more important it is to listen—to everyone, no matter their rank or title.

Young majors on his staff recall that General Berger would ask them about their own experiences in the Corps, and how things could work better.

And for anyone with a good idea, he's always got an open door and an open mind.

Now, if you ask General Berger how he stays grounded, his answer is simple: his family.

And let me recognize General Berger's parents, JC and Martha, his wife Donna, and their four sons: Joseph, Ryan, Phillip, and Jeffrey.

You know, there is nothing more important to Dave than family.

He loves coaching his sons' sports teams, bragging on their accomplishments, and riding four-wheelers back on the farm with his grandchildren.

He takes leave just to spend time with his family, and he turns his phone off so he can be present.

And Dave always makes clear to the teams he leads: family comes first.

He loves talking with his staff about what their families are

up to—and he encourages them to make sure they're spending time with their loved ones.

And that really makes a difference to Marines at all levels of the Corps.

So I want to thank Dave for his focus on family. And I want to thank this outstanding military family for serving right alongside General Berger.

Donna, thanks for all that you've done for our country and the Corps—and for your tireless work on behalf of military families.

This year marks 42 years since Dave became a Marine—and 42 years of marriage for Dave and Donna. So let's give it up for them.

And to General Berger's children and your families—thanks for your love and support, and for what you're doing to serve our country as well.

You know, years ago, Dave and Donna had a conversation about whether he should stay in the Marines. And they decided that if he ever had three bad days in a row, he'd get out of the military.

And General Berger says that he's never had those three bad days.

So Dave, I want to thank you for everything that you have done to strengthen the Marine Corps and to defend the United States.

Now, I know that everyone here is looking forward to the rapid confirmation of a distinguished successor to General Berger.

You know, it's been more than a century since the U.S. Marine Corps has operated without a Senate-confirmed commandant.

Smooth and timely transitions of confirmed leadership are central to the defense of the United States, and to the full strength of the most powerful fighting force in history.

Stable and orderly leadership transitions are also vital to maintaining our unmatched network of allies and partners.

And they're crucial for our military readiness.

And of course, our military families give up so much to support those who serve—so they shouldn't be weighed down with any extra uncertainty.

We have a sacred duty to do right by those who volunteer to wear the cloth of our nation, and their families.

I remain confident that all Americans can come together to agree on that basic obligation to those who keep us safe.

I am also confident that the United States Senate will meet its responsibilities.

And I look forward to welcoming an outstanding new Commandant for our Marine Corps, and to adding many other distinguished senior leaders across the Joint Force.

You know, there's a saying in the Marines: "We don't accept applications, only commitments."

And every day, Marines bring their trademark commitment—quiet but fierce—to their teammates, their commanders, and their country.

That commitment has allowed America to fight and win countless battles across the centuries.

That commitment is what lets America race to the aid of those in need, anywhere on the planet.

And that commitment is why I'm confident that our military is

ready to deter aggression wherever we can and to fight and win wherever we must—today, tomorrow, and for decades to come.

And I am confident that we will rise to the challenge of making our country stronger, and making our world safer.

To our Marine Corps: thank you for your unfailing commitment to our country.

And to General Berger: thank you for your unfailing commitment to our Marine Corps.

May God bless you and your family. May God continue to bless our Marine Corps. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.

Thank you very much.